

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, Director of Communications, Deputy Spokesman, Multi-National Force – Iraq

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PARTICIPANTS:

Rear Admiral Greg Smith

REPORTERS:

**Ahmed Jassem from Arabiya Newspaper
Steve Farrell from The New York Times
Brian from AFP**

REPORTERS 1-11

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

RDML SMITH: Good afternoon. As-Salāmu `Alaykum. I am here today with you to highlight some positive events from the past week in Iraq and to share some disturbing signs that Iraq's enemies are becoming increasingly desperate and their actions are becoming increasingly appalling as well. I would like to begin by expressing my condolences to the families and friends of the victims of this week's attacks in Mosul. From the initial blast of an extremely large cache of explosives stored in a residential building that resulted in the death and injury of so many innocent victims to the suicide bombing that killed Brigadier Salih, the provincial director of police and members of his staff—our thoughts and prayers go out to them all. We mentioned...we have witnessed the heroic efforts of the men and women of Mosul who responded to these tragic events. We know how hard the Iraqi Security Forces, emergency personnel, city fathers, and many others are working to re-establish security and return the confidence lost when such indiscriminate violence unfolds. Brigadier Salih was doing his part when he was murdered. He responded to the initial attack to try and comfort those and restore safety. He was also on a mission of mercy to comfort those affected and to strengthen the resolve of his officers continuing to protect the people of Mosul. Brigadier Salih died doing his duty. We honor him and we pledge to his successors and

comrades that we will remain steadfast partners. We know firsthand the vital work of the Iraqi Security Forces and we are proud to assist them in every way we can. We mentioned previously the development of the Iraqi police force with the graduation of 1,830 new police officers from Numaniyah at the National Police Training Center. These new officers will enrich and expand the capabilities of their nation's security forces. They received individualized, specialized instruction and education. Some will focus on anti-terrorism operations. Some will be investigators giving people a symbol of the rule of law and the priority its government has in defending all Iraqis from violence and crime. All of these officers have pledged their loyalty to the united, democratic Iraq. They have expressed their commitment to all of the people of Iraq. And they have bravely chosen to stand with those who want a better tomorrow instead of violence and anarchy offered by Iraq's enemies. Numaniyah is not the only location where Iraq is building new strength in the battle against lawlessness. There are recruits and officers currently undergoing training at the Habbaniyah Police Training Center in al Anbar. Since it opened in June of last year, it has graduated more than 2,000 trained police officers. Three specialized schools are building capabilities there. One is a convoy operations and street survivability course. There is also the train-the-trainer course which equips the Iraqi police to educate and lead

its own. And the others...and another is the officers' transition integration program. These capabilities matter and are having positive effects in the lives of Iraqi citizens. We continue to see examples of the increasingly professionalized Iraqi Security Forces stepping up to protect their people. We've seen these gains being made by soldiers, police officers, and groups like the Awakening and Concerned Local Citizens. Two days ago, near Karmah, a unit of the Iraqi Army discovered two critical stockpiles of high explosives. Together, these caches contained more than 2,500 pounds of homemade explosives; over a ton and a half of material created to kill and injure innocent Iraqis. The Iraqi Army, being on the ground and among its people, saved an unknown number of lives with this find. This is not an isolated incident. The same day, northeast of Ramadi, the Iraqi Army got a tip from a local citizen and was able to recover a stockpile containing plastic explosives, rocket and mortar rounds, detonating cord, and ammunition. These finds happen every day, and are also in every corner of Iraq. As Operation Phantom Phoenix continues, we are seeing Iraq's commitment to its security forces produce real results. We have also witnessed more tangible results of the investment Iraq is making in law enforcement with the successful conduct of Ashura celebrations throughout Iraq. Millions of people have expressed their religious obligations in a way that was unthinkable only a short time ago.

Mass pilgrimages and large gatherings have brought together those who want to honor their religion in peace and with each other. This is truly a picture that speaks a thousand words. Taken from the air, throngs of people from Iraq and neighboring countries can be seen marching in peaceful observances in Karbala. The success of Ashura was possible thanks to the commitment of this government and of the armed forces it is building and the police it is recruiting and training. Not every event will be as successful as these commemorations of Ashura. They cannot be as long as Iraq is beset by the foreign ideologies of al-Qaeda. Instead of mutual respect and tolerance and unity, al-Qaeda seeks division and hatred. Sheik Ahmed Abu Risha recently shared his perspective on al-Qaeda when he said, "When the attack...when we attack al-Qaeda, they flee, hide, and come back with their new tactics. The only tactic that is left for them now is to commit suicide." Al-Qaeda-Iraq is increasingly dependent on suicidal murder perpetrated by imported killers and duped innocents. Ninety percent of the attack...I'm sorry. Ninety percent of the suicide murders inflicted on the Iraqi people are committed by foreigners brought in by al-Qaeda to spread destruction. This past week, you have seen already two children exploited for murderous suicide. In Mosul and Tikrit, 15 year-olds were exploited to deal death. We're not sure whether one of these children even knew he was being used to deliver a bomb.

These attacks were perpetrated at a funeral, a solemn religious ceremony, and at a school, a place that should be a safe haven for the young. Children are not only humanity's future, they are the most innocent and vulnerable among us. We have a trust to care for them, to raise them up as good citizens. Al-Qaeda is instead trying to brainwash children in hate...with hate and death. We see a stark contrast between those who are building a strong, secure, and peaceful society and those who seek to create a culture of violence, hate, and despair. Al-Qaeda-Iraq cannot win a popular election. They will find no safe haven in a civil society. No one will choose to join or support them when there are options that instead promise hope and opportunity. So AQI is reduced to indoctrinating Iraq's most innocent and vulnerable: the youth. Its democratic and elected government is building schools, training engineers and police officers and doctors. Iraq's democratic elected government is creating avenues for peace and security. Al-Qaeda-Iraq is sending 15-year-old boys on suicide missions to spread death and hopelessness. It does not have to be this way. The Iraqi people are building a society based on cooperation and the rule of law. That rule includes rehabilitation and reconciliation for those who make mistakes. Under the previous regime, civil society was stood on its head. Since the Iraqi people were liberated from those perversions, it has taken time to build up lasting institutions and new ways of

living together. Some have gone astray, and with help, can return to society as productive members. On Thursday, many who had failed to live up to the rule of law were given a new chance. In a ceremony at a coalition detention facility in Baghdad, 100 men, Sunni and Shi'a, were reintegrated back into their neighborhoods. After passing through a rigorous review board examination, determinations were made that these Iraqis were ready to become contributing citizens once again. Each of their cases was individually considered. Each of them made a pledge before an Iraqi judge swearing to live peacefully from that day forward. They go out to maintain that pledge equipped with new tools. All of these men had an opportunity to further their education while they were detained. This reintegration program offered religious counseling, vocational training, and a fundamental education course...instruction. We congratulate these men, their families, and the nation of Iraq as they craft a brighter future. In the words of Dr. Nihad al-Jibouri, who spoke at the release ceremony, "I hope you are thinking positively to participate in rebuilding the country, because the Iraqi society will welcome you." These men are not alone. In January, 785 other detainees were also reintegrated into their communities. Last year, 8,952 Iraqi citizens passed through the screening and review process and rejoined society. Today, I have discussed the nature of the enemy facing the Iraqi people,

hopeful signs that the people are increasing their ability to fight this enemy, and the way the people are growing the ranks of those who want a better tomorrow. And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions. Yes, sir. In the back row.

REP1: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: A few days ago, you announced a campaign to pursue al-Qaeda in Mosul. What's the aim behind this? Are you giving a chance to al-Qaeda to flee to other places and other areas? What's the aim behind this campaign? Why don't you conduct the operations in a more secret way?

RDML SMITH: We have announced operations across Iraq to hunt down al-Qaeda in areas where they retain some sense of influence and have developed the ability to operate from in terms of sanctuary and secure areas that they had held ground for many, many years. In areas like Diyala, for instance, where forces in the last few weeks have had great success in rooting al-Qaeda out of small towns and villages as they, again, move forward in our quest to rid all of Iraq from al-Qaeda. Regarding Mosul, an area where we recognize it is of strategic importance to al-Qaeda, our operations will continue in that area. Again, not in a new way but in a continued way, as we

have over the vast many months in rooting al-Qaeda from areas like Mosul and elsewhere. Sir.

REP2: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Ahmed Jassem from Al Arabiya Newspaper. Al-Qaeda is a terrorist organization and it's killed so many innocents...Iraqi...from the Iraqi citizens. And a few days ago, there has been an explosion in Mosul as you had mentioned a moment ago. And of course, these tons of explosives actually come from countries. So, could you tell us who...which countries actually stand behind this attack?

RDML SMITH: We have not determined that a country is a behind the attack or the explosion in Mosul. We certainly know that there is a great deal of explosive materials that are left over from the previous regime that are available to extremists to put together in large explosive devices. In the case of this particular incident, we know there were several...tens of thousands of pounds of explosive material inside this residence. We're still working with the Iraqi Security Force to determine exactly what happened in terms of why it exploded or how it exploded. But we do know that there was an influence in the region of bringing in arms and munitions. And we've asked, as has the Iraqis asked, that all its partners in the region participate in a peaceful transition of Iraq and support stopping of any smuggling of

arms or weapons or financing of such activity. But specifically to that event, again, we're reviewing whether or not we can determine precisely what the cause of that tragic incident was. Sir.

REP3: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from [unintelligible] Iraq Agency. Concerning the update of the operations Phantom Phoenix, you haven't mentioned that you captured any or killed any terrorists. That's the first question. The Minister of Defense said that al-Qaeda is located in Mosul province, but the operations now are in Northern Baghdad, without focusing on Mosul in particular. Thank you.

RDML SMITH: You are correct. Again, Operation Phantom Phoenix is not focused in any one area in Iraq. It is the whole of Iraq that we're focusing our energies on. And we have made several announcements on the progress to date of Operation Phantom Phoenix, the number of terrorists that have been both captured and killed. And just last week I mentioned that well over 1,000 had been detained, well over 100 killed. Of those, nearly 100 are very high-ranking al-Qaeda members that were wrapped up in those operations. So, there has been progress, and as we continue to make progress in Diyala, as we continue to make progress to the southwest of Baghdad with Operations Marne Thunderbolt, you'll see such progress as it moves

forward up into Mosul. We're not going to, of course, discuss future operations from this podium. But it's safe to say that we've had a long-term focus on the north. And we'll continue to operate with the Iraqi Security Forces to rid al-Qaeda from all areas, no matter where they are at. I think back here we've got... Sir.

REP4: Steve Farrell of The New York Times. A similar sort of question, actually. Could you explain how the Diyala operation, which began in early January, is part of or seen as part of Phantom Phoenix or wider operations across the north. I appreciate you are not going to go into specifics as to where you're going to go. But is it part of a greater whole? Is it a series of rolling operations? Does it fit in at all?

RDML SMITH: Absolutely. The operations of MND-North under Major General Hertling have been very much a part of Operation Phantom Phoenix as those operations kicked off after the first of the year. And you've heard General Hertling and others discuss operations, not only in the Diyala area, but also in the other three provinces in the north. It is, again, a comprehensive effort. It's not meant to be viewed as a single group of activities that are moving from one place to the next. In fact, in this case, in the north, their force is spread out throughout the four provinces; they are integrated and being used to

collectively address the problems associated in those areas. And so, now with the force levels that General Hertling has available, both coalition and Iraqi police and Iraqi Army, it's giving him an opportunity to address the concerns in the north in a complete, holistic way. But those are parts of the overall efforts across Iraq to include, again, operations still in Baghdad here, in the belts, and certainly to the south in Arab Jabour. Yes, sir.

REP5: Brian from AFP. We're getting more and more reports that the Concerned Local Citizens Groups have been infiltrated by al-Qaeda and that in the past month, at least 100 members have been killed. It doesn't seem all that effective in Ninawa Province. Are you worried the system is starting to collapse?

RDML SMITH: No. I wouldn't characterize it in such harsh language. First of all, I don't think that there has been a tremendous amount of infiltration of the CLC program by al-Qaeda. There certainly have been attempts to do so, and we recognize that. We also recognize that the Awakening groups are well-led, well supervised. There is a strong tribal and communal connection in those Awakening groups. They know precisely who their members are. Our forces work very closely to weed out individuals who even show the least bit of signs of disloyalty to the overall efforts. As to their vulnerability by al-

Qaeda, clearly al-Qaeda sees the Concerned Local Citizens, these Awakening groups, as a threat to their existence. But it's really more of a symbol of Iraq's resistance to al-Qaeda by way of these people who have stood up. And they recognize that through intimidation, perhaps they can reverse the course of loyalty to the Concerned Local Citizen groups by intimidating other populations not to repeat that activity or, in some cases, to abandon it all together. But which has been a real note and worthy of saying often up here at this podium is that the Iraqi people have shown no sign of backing down from al-Qaeda. And there are no...I don't think any...there are no chinks or cracks in the armor of the very strength that the, again, these groups represent in their pledge to take on al-Qaeda head, on even despite the threats and intimidation, the murder. They have remained very strong. Sir.

REP6: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: There are so many operations and air strikes in Arab Jabour. What's the recent update about Phantom Phoenix? And have you...and also what's the recent update about in Arab Jabour and also Phantom Phoenix?

RDML SMITH: Arab Jabour was an area where you saw at least two occasions in the last few weeks where air power was used to neutralize the

threats there. And the threats principally were the, again, in areas where there was sanctuary, al-Qaeda had a chance to bury and in many cases hide large caches of weapons. And also the improvised explosive devices were arrayed throughout that area to interdict any movement of coalition forces. So, to avoid the obvious loss of life that could be associated with moving our forces on the ground, the use of air power to strategically take out these targets was the purpose of those missions. In all, I think there was probably close to 70 or so targets that were struck over two specific days. And those missions were deemed to be very successful and will allow now for coalition forces and Iraqi Security Forces to move on the ground more safely and begin the second stages of their efforts to now clear any remaining al-Qaeda that are working there and operating out of there, retain the area through partnering with the Concerned Local Citizens, and then ultimately starting to rebuild the economies of those areas. For Operation Phantom Phoenix, again, in sort of a summation, I mentioned just a second ago the numbers associated with some of those operations. But you'll see Phantom Phoenix continuing, not only in Arab Jabour, but also in the north for the weeks to come as part of our overall efforts against al-Qaeda. Sir.

REP7: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Could you please tell us about the places that the weapons have

been made? You found some weapons. Could you please tell us where those weapons were made? The weapons that you found.

RDML SMITH: Well, again, many of the weapons we're finding are left over munitions from the previous regime. There's clearly been decades-worth of purchase of mortars, rockets, other explosive materials that had been here when the coalition and others came in earlier this...in 2003. But since that time, there has also been a clear indication that other countries have chosen to also supply weapons. In the case of Iran, we know that there has been a historical arming of militia groups. But the weapons I'm referring to most recently, have been just large cached stockpiles of, again, very...things that have been on the battlefield for some time, and were being used by extremists to use to make improvised explosive devices and create other explosive devices. So, not specific to any one country, but they've been here for some time. Sir.

REP8: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: In some areas in Baghdad, and until now, there are some terrorist groups. And the Iraqis...the displaced people ask you to help them so that they can go back to the places like in Huriyah, Shola, Jamya, al-Kudra neighborhood. So could you...would the Iraqi government help to bring back those displaced people to their neighborhoods?

RDML SMITH: Bringing back Iraqis to their home is clearly one of the main objectives of the Iraqi government, and they've said so. And they are working on plans to do that in a way that ensures a couple of key things. One is that people have a place to return back to. And then when they return to their homes, that those homes are available for their occupancy. If there are other people living in those homes, then there needs to be a resolution of that dispute. The last thing you want to do is bring folks from outside Baghdad, as an example, whether living here in Iraq or outside the country, only to find out they've got nowhere to go to. So there's a very deliberative set of steps that the government of Iraq intends to take to ensure that occurs. And they're building up that ability to do so. So, yes. There very much is an attempt to do that. But it has to be done in a very smart and careful way to ensure you don't create yet another problem for those people. Yeah.

REP9: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from [unintelligible] Newspaper. How could you explain the weapons that you found and the...? How could you explain... How do they enter Iraq? That's the first question. The second question regarding the weapons and the technology of the American forces. So, when will you supply the Iraqi Army with such up to

date and modern weapons?

RDML SMITH: Again, I think I've answered your first question already, but let me try again. The weapons that we're finding, the munitions we're finding in these large cached stockpiles, many of them date to the previous regime who bought literally millions and millions of rounds of ammunition, mortars, and rockets. Those munitions, mortars, and rockets were not secure when the...after the fall of Saddam in such a way that militant groups were able to take custody of them, hide them in small stockpiles, and have been using them over the course of the last three or four years to make improvised explosive devices. As to your second question, last year alone, the Government of Iraq spent well over \$3 billion to equip both the Army and the police with modern equipment. The equipment that they are purchasing in 2007 was in troop carriers—the ability to move small forces, both Army and police, around Iraq. Certainly light arms in terms of M-16s, munitions. They've bought, for the first time, light aircraft. They are now operating helicopters. They are also moving their forces now with the use of their own aircraft. So, there has been an investment in 2007 that will continue in 2008 at a pace even greater than what we saw last year. The choices being made by the Government of Iraq on what to purchase and when and how fast are Iraqi choices. And we're participating

and supporting their efforts as best we can. That corner, please.

REP10: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Assam Faisel[ph] from Asharq Al-Awsat Agency. You are working with the Awakening groups to maintain security at the hot zones. How do you evaluate their performance? Is it...or are they one of the people that used to target you in the past and now actually working with you?

RDML SMITH: The groups that have formed to become neighborhood watches, the Concerned Local Citizens, have done so because they have chosen to make a difference in their neighborhoods. They are tired of the violence. They are tired of the corruption. They are tired of the hatred. And to the degree that they have now aligned with our efforts, our goals, and those goals of the Iraqi government to bring about security is a good thing. We see a very positive and very constructive relationship between Concerned Local Citizens and the coalition and Iraqi Security Forces. A very close partnership. They often work side by side with Iraqi police and Iraqi Army in those neighborhoods. They are often the first line of defense, if you will, in those neighborhoods. They are the first checkpoints leading into the neighborhoods. They are taking great risk. They are standing up. They are maintaining the watch. They are actually securing their

neighborhoods as they have promised to do so. There...so there is great promise here that this will lead to a considerable amount of accommodation and reconciliation as we begin to heal the wounds of Iraq with people recognizing their responsibility to be productive and contributing members of society. As I mentioned in my remarks, the Iraqi people are making tremendous strides in the rule of law. And a great component of that rule of law is to ensure that the security and safety of neighborhoods by legitimate security forces, both Iraqi police and Iraqi Army, is a long-term goal of Iraq. But in the meantime, as they build up the Iraqi Security Forces, the need for these Concerned Local Citizens in those neighborhoods is critical at this time. The long-term effort, though, is to ensure that all Iraq's security is done without the need for a Concerned Local Citizen Group to be part of the security apparatus in the future. Follow up?

REP10: Speaks in Arabic.

INT: What about the Awakening groups and CLC when you are done with them, when there is no need for them? What's the support of the Multi-National Forces for the CLCs that protected their neighborhoods and eliminated al-Qaeda or terrorism?

RDML SMITH: Thank you for that follow up. The...as you know, and I've said

before, we think around 20 percent or so of the local Concerned Local Citizens today do want to join the Iraqi Army or the Iraqi police as a permanent employment. The...and there has been, in Baghdad alone, 9,000 of those members are now part...have gone through the screening process and are in the beginning stages of training and going through the academies we talked about earlier in my remarks. So eventually those 9,000 will come through a formal training program and return to their cities and their villages as Iraqi police or Iraqi Army. The remaining 80 percent of the Concerned Local Citizens do not want to be long-term security personnel for the Government of Iraq. They do want a future though, and they do want some support. The Iraqi government has already committed, as has the coalition, to a considerable effort in 2008 that will provide jobs training, job counseling, and job placement for these individuals who want, again, a future that we can support through either public- or private-sector employment. So there will be a place for all Concerned Local Citizens in this new economy, and the Government of Iraq is committed, as is the coalition, to help these individuals who have bravely stood up, who have certainly taken great sacrifice for themselves and their families. And we're going to do all that we can to make certain they've got, again, a role in any capacity that they can fill, either security or in public- or private-sector employment. Sir.

REP11: On the Concerned Local Citizens, just as a microcosm of wider things, many that we've spoken to in recent weeks across...outside Baghdad—up north, down south—have been saying that they are not being allowed into the security forces. That they resent it. And that they regard this as a litmus test on the ground of failure by the government to really show concrete means of reconciliation, of reaching out to them. I just wondered what would you have to say about that.

RDML SMITH: Well, I suspect there are many who feel that it has not gone fast enough. And I think we would agree with that. And the speed by which you can make this work is constrained by a couple of key areas. One is, of course, just the overall administration of 80,000 Concerned Local Citizens to ensure that the Government of Iraq has the assurances of their screening and their ability to meet the standards associated with employment as either police or Army. The second part of that, of course, is the actual training programs themselves have a limit to them. The numbers of students that can physically go through a training program is limited by the capacity of the schoolhouses and the academies. So, as I mentioned, 9,000 now have been entered into the process to which they are now in a queue to begin that training program. That's a significant part of the

80,000, certainly. We have seen over 1,800 have gone through that process in Abu Ghraib—I mentioned that before. And if you take into consideration the 10,000 to 20,000 original Awakening members in Al Anbar that have already been through a training program and are already serving as police officers or members of the Army in Al Anbar, it does demonstrate that the program is working. Is it working as fast as all would like? No. But it is working. Any other questions? If not, I thank you very much.